

STORIES
FOR
SUMMER DAYS & WINTER NIGHTS.
SECOND SERIES.

THE POACHER'S
FAMILY.



LONDON:
GROOMBRIDGE AND SONS,
PATERNOSTER ROW.

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THE PALACE



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The Crooked Billet.

THE POACHER
AND
HIS FAMILY.



Dusterly Wood.

Page 24.

London :

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THE POACHER AND HIS FAMILY.

CHAPTER I.

THE CROOKED BILLET.

A good many years ago, my story begins. It was a cold, blustering night in November; the winter seemed to be setting in early with frost and snow; and the poor people in the village of Dusterly were very gloomy and very discontented, for there was not much work to be done, and there would not be, all the winter, they thought; and bread was dear—nine-pence halfpenny for a four-pound loaf,—and it was going to be dearer, so the baker said, and so the miller said, and so every body said.

If it was cold without doors, the more need was there of a good fire within. So thought Sam Giles at the Crooked Billet; and, accordingly, he heaped fresh logs on the wood which was blazing on the hearth; and, sitting down in the chimney corner, he went on smoking his pipe, which he had laid aside when he made up the fire.

The Crooked Billet was the name of a low sort of public-house, and Sam Giles was the landlord;—Black Giles he was called by some who had read or heard of the story of Black Giles the poacher; and the name was appropriate enough in more respects than one, for Sam was a dark man in complexion; he had also a gloomy black cast of countenance,—never looking straight before him, or good-humoured, or open, as an honest man should; and his character too well corresponded with his face.

The Crooked Billet was some little way out of the village, in a lone road, not far from the great Dusterly estate, and handy enough to the woods. The house itself had been a farm-house in days gone by; and a big old rambling house it was, sadly out of repair too; but it answered Sam's purpose very well:

the great kitchen served for a drinking room, the cellar for beer, and that was pretty near all that he wanted in the way of house room :—so he said, at least, when he first hired the tumble-down old place for a beer-shop, took out a licence, stuck over his door the curiously twisted limb of an oak, and gave the house the name which it bore.

Sam Giles soon got plenty of custom, for there was no want of hard drinkers in Dusterly and around, who would have beer if they could not get bread. So, night after night, the big kitchen was filled with the fumes of strong liquor, the smoke of tobacco, and the loud talking, laughing, singing, cursing, or quarrelling of a noisy crew of tipplers and gamblers.

The evening of which I am now writing was Saturday evening. It was too early yet for customers ; but Sam knew they would come presently ; for Saturday night, after the farmers had paid the men their weekly wages, was the night of all others when the great kitchen at the Crooked Billet was sure to be full :—so the landlord sat quietly and contentedly in his chimney corner, smoking away at his black pipe, and scorching his leathern leggings at the fire.

Sam Giles was quite correct in his anticipations : it was not long before voices were heard outside, then the door of the Crooked Billet was opened again and again ; and by the time the great bell at Dusterly Hall chimed long and loud for dinner,—and that was at seven o'clock,—business at the beer-shop was going on briskly.

Men of all ages—country labourers mostly—to the number of twenty or more, sat on the deal forms and around the clumsy benches of Sam Giles's tap-room : there were gray-headed old men, whose hands trembled sorely as they lifted the beer mugs to their mouths ; but they drank lustily for all that : there were strong middle-aged men, and middle-aged men who looked far from strong, but were haggard and thin ; but, strong or weak, they all drank lustily

too : and there were young men and lads, some bold-faced and some who seemed shy and half ashamed of themselves when they first went in ; but, bold or shrinking, they did the best they could to be like men by drinking lustily also.

They were all dirty enough, young and old ; for people don't generally "clean themselves up" before going to a beer-shop ; and the grime of a week's labour, or more than one week's neglect, hung about every one of them. Nearly all of them were smoking as well as drinking ; and though the room was filled with strong stifling tobacco smoke, the smell of that helped to cover the unpleasant steam which was drawn out by the blazing fire from their damp working garments.

There was talking enough, and the more beer they drunk the noisier did the drinkers become : but there was not much singing nor laughing that night at the Crooked Billet. On the contrary, there were a good many black looks and sullen discontented speeches. The middle-aged men said that the country was going to "wreck and ruin," that working men had not the chance to earn money enough to keep their families, that masters were tyrants and that rich men deserved to be brought down to poverty. The old toppers declared that it did not use to be so in *their* young days, that men were men then, when every cottager had a pig in his pigstye, and a flitch of bacon on his rack. They all agreed in saying that 'now-a-days there was one law for the rich and another for the poor, and what with grinding down wages, and taking away commons, and what with dear bread, and game laws, England was no place for the hard-working man.' The young men listened as the older ones talked, and now and then they put in a word also.

There were other causes for sullenness and discontent among Sam Giles's guests that night, than these general ones ; for some of the men had that day been discharged from work, and told by their masters that

they should have nothing more for them to do this spring ; and others expected that the same would be said to them next week, so that all they had to look to, they said, was parish relief for themselves and their families. But the thought of this did not make them drink or smoke any the less, but rather the more. Then, there were others who had some time been out of work ; and how they managed to find money to drink Crooked Billet beer, was a secret between them and Crooked Billet's landlord, Sam Giles. And why Sam Giles was so ready to give credit to two or three of these men, for the beer they drank, and the tobacco they smoked, when they had not got money to pay for them—that was a secret too.

At any rate, Sam Giles, though he was very busy in serving beer all round to those who called for more, found time to say a few words privately to one and another of the roughest looking men in his kitchen ; and these men seemed determined to sit out all the rest, as well as to keep up the game, as they said ;—meaning by this, to keep Sam's beer tap in full run.

Presently, a man who came in after the rest, pulled out of his pocket an old newspaper, and began to read aloud an account of a desperate affray between a party of poachers and the gamekeepers of lord somebody in another part of the country. While this was being read, there was general silence and attention, until towards the end, when it came out that the poachers got off victorious, while the gamekeepers were dreadfully beaten about their heads, and one of them was dangerously wounded ; and then the smoke-stained rafters of the Crooked Billet rang with shouts of applause, and cries of " Well done," 'sarved 'em right,' mixed with oaths, fearful to hear, and demands for more beer to drink the healths of the brave poachers.

Among the men who had that day been thrown out of work, was one who looked more gloomy than

8 One of his companions, and who made no effort to join in their conversation. Once or twice he had risen, and taken a step towards the door ; but a word or two had brought him back again, and there he sat, drinking with the rest, but speaking scarcely a sentence.

This man was not much above thirty-five years of age, and, both in dress and person, he was somewhat neater than his pot-house companions. His smock frock was old and worn ; but it was not in holes and tatters. Where these had been, or would have been, were patches not long since put on, some of them ; and his shirt collar and neckerchief did not seem to have had more than a week's wear out of them since they were washed. His name was Edward Strickland.

— 'Come Ned, another pot between us—what do you



say?' said one of the party with whom he was drinking.

'I have had enough, I reckon,' he replied; 'and must be off;,' and he made another attempt to get to the door.

'His wife will be at him if he stops much longer,' said another in a loud whisper; 'he doesn't dare get home late o' nights.'

'Don't I?' exclaimed Strickland fiercely; 'I dare to do what I like as much as any of you.'

There was a loud laugh—the first that evening in the tap-room of the Crooked Billet—at Ned Strickland's expense; but the end of it was that he sat down again, and, to show that he was not afraid of his wife, called for more beer. Presently, Sam Giles whispered something in his ear.

It was eleven o'clock, and the room was still as full as it had been four hours earlier; for if some had left, others had come in; but most of the drinkers had been at the Crooked Billet all the evening. At about eleven o'clock, however, they began to move off, some of them staggering, and some hallooing, till by-and-by only three or four men remained with Sam Giles. Of these laggards one was Edward Strickland, the others were the men to whom the landlord had supplied beer on credit, as it seemed.

'Ned,' said Sam Giles, in a low tone, and when he had opened the door cautiously, to see if any listeners were lurking about perhaps; 'Ned, you used to be a good hand with the wires.'

'Did I, Mr. Giles?' replied Strickland; 'that's more than you know for, I reckon. And is that all you wanted me to stop behind the rest for,—to tell me that?'

'Not all, Ned: you are out of work, ar'n't you?' said Black Giles, with a sly leer, from his downcast eyes.

'Yes, I am; you know that as well as I do.'

'Well, I do know it, and you'll have to go to the parish, I suppose.'

'May be I shall: I reckon I shall,' returned Edward Strickland, gloomily: 'I can't see my wife and young-uns starving—they must go, at any rate.'

'What's to hinder you from going out o' nights a bit?' said Sam.

'Nothing as I know on, only I made a bit of a promise before I was married; and I've kept to it till now,' replied Ned.

The other men laughed derisively, and Sam Giles observed that promises are like pie-crust, made to be broken.

It was rather remarkable that only twice that evening there had been loud laughter at the Crooked Billet; and both times it had been at Edward Strickland, for being *afraid* of his wife.

'You used to know where to find a hare as well as here and there one,' continued Black Giles.

'That was when I did it more for the fun of it than anything else,' said Ned.

'And why not do it in earnest now? Come; it will pay well. I'll be a customer for as many as you can bring. I know what to do with them. To-night, now: what do you say for a start to-night?'

'No, no; I tell you, no. I wont—not to-night at least,' Edward added, more irresolutely; and without stopping to hear any more, he opened the door, and walked—unsteadily, for the beer he had taken, and the tobacco he had smoked made him feel giddy, and more than that;—but, though unsteadily, he walked away from the Crooked Billet. Once or twice, however, as he felt in his pocket, and remembered how much he had spent that evening, and how little remained of his week's pay, he half turned back again; but at length he dragged himself away, and the Crooked Billet was left for that night to the landlord and his "particular friends."

CHAPTER II.

A VILLAGE HISTORY.

WE have seen something of the husband's Saturday night ; we will presently look in at the wife's. But before we do that, we must give a word or two about their past history and their present condition.

Edward Strickland, or Ned Strickland, as he was generally called, had lived in the village of Dusterly all his life. In his boyhood he had no one to guide him, that is, to guide him aright, for his mother died when he was a child, and his father was an idle drunken vagabond. The only, or almost the only thing Ned had learned of his father, was the art of poaching. But for all this bad teaching and want of teaching, Edward Strickland did not grow up to be a worthless youth. He was good-humoured and obliging, and, strange to say, disposed to be industrious. Before he was twelve years old, he had begun to provide for himself by honest work, and never, from that time, had his father troubled himself with contributing a farthing towards Ned's support, though he often dragged the boy into the unlawful courses by which he got a precarious living. In plain terms, Edward Strickland's father was a notorious poacher and smuggler ; and the village of Dusterly was well situated for these midnight occupations ; it was near a wild part of the sea coast,—this suited smuggling ; and it was almost surrounded by woods and game preserves,—this suited poaching.

But it did not turn out well with Ned's father for all that. Neither smuggling nor poaching, nor both together, could make him rich. Sometimes he had a small handful of money, a windfall, as he called it ; but then he drank and drank till it was all gone. Oftener he was near starving, and then he looked as wild and savage as might well be. It is not of Ned's father, however, that our story tells ; so I shall only say that the old man died at last in great poverty

and distress—for he would not go into the poor-house, nor receive parish relief,—and that he would have been starved outright if it had not been for his son, about whom he had never seemed to care one farthing.

Edward Strickland was about eighteen years old when his father died, and was in tolerably steady work. But the seed of bad training and bad example had sprung up and brought forth some bad fruit. For the fun of it, as he said, he liked sometimes to go into the woods at night, and, more than once, was near getting into trouble for poaching. But he escaped; and when, at the age of four or five and twenty, he married a respectable young woman, who had been servant in a family near Dusterly, he solemnly promised to give up the fun of poaching, and to give it up for ever. It was only on these terms that Mary would consent to have Edward for a husband; but he readily gave the promise, and she as readily believed him.

Edward Strickland had kept his promise faithfully; and, for several years, he was a kind and steady husband, except when—as was now and then the case—he was led astray by idle companions. This, indeed, was his great fault,—he did not like to say no; and thus he was too often enticed to waste time and spend money foolishly—both of which might have been well employed.

The setting up of the Crooked Billet was a bad thing every way for Ned Strickland and for the whole village besides. The working men were tempted, more than they ever had been before, to spend their earnings in sottishness and gambling, while their poor wives and families often suffered from want. Then, as the farmers would keep to the old plan of paying their workmen on Saturday night, instead of Friday, or any other day in the week—Sundays excepted—as a good friend of theirs, and of the working people too, wanted them to do,—the consequence was that the men went straight from

the pay-table to the Crooked Billet, got drunk, because they could sleep off their drunkenness next day without losing work, and took home less and less money for the support of their families. Then the poor women, instead of going to shop on Saturday for what they wanted, had to buy food on Sunday morning ; so the village shop was kept open until church time, and almost all the money the poor people had to spend there was spent then.

This was a bad state of things ; and it had a bad effect, and gave the village of Dusterly—one of the prettiest villages in the whole county—a bad name, which it richly merited. It had a bad effect on Edward Strickland. He left off caring about being sober and steady ; and at the time we first met him at the Crooked Billet, he had been for several years a sore trouble to his wife, who, do what she could, and she tried her best, could not keep him from squandering half his wages on drink among bad companions, and who dreaded, not without reason, that worse things were in store for her than even a neglectful and spendthrift husband. Yes, worse things ; for still, at times, Ned seemed to love his wife and children, though that love did not keep him back from injuring them ; and his poor wife well knew that even that little love could not last much longer unless a change for the better should take place in her husband's conduct ; and of this she had little hope.

I should say, before finishing this chapter, that there was a village about a mile from Dusterly in which was a Sunday-school ; and that a few of the children of Dusterly attended it. Among them were Willy and Fanny Strickland.

CHAPTER III.

SATURDAY NIGHT AT HOME.

It was not a grand home—that of Edward Strickland—you may be certain. None of the Dusterly cottages were very commodious or comfortable, and this was not one of the best. To be sure, looking at it in the bright sunshine of a summer's day, it might have seemed a pretty place, as many country cottages do, which are really not pleasant to live in all the year round. This cottage in which Edward Strickland and his family lived, for instance, had a white-washed front, a straw thatch, not very old, and a porch at the door, over which had been trained a honeysuckle and a china rose; there was a small garden behind, and a garden in front, too, with flower borders, for poor Mary was fond of flowers, and took pains with them. Altogether, on a summer's day, then, this cottage looked rather inviting than otherwise.

But this is the best side of a picture which has two sides. To see the other we must look in at the cottage on the same coldblustering winterly November evening that took us to the Crooked Billet.

Ha! the dull ashy fire in that little grate is not for one moment to be compared with the blazing logs on Sam Giles's hearth. We wonder how Edward Strickland could sit in that warm tap-room, when he knew that his poor wife and Willy and Fanny and little baby-boy, had scarcely a bit of wood to burn at home—none but what Willy had gone out that day to pick up by the road-side or under the trees in Dusterly park. It was not right of Edward Strickland, I think.

It was tea-time—no, not *tea*-time, either, in that cottage home, for there was no tea in the tea-pot, neither was there in the caddy, nor had there been for many a long day. It was supper-time then, for on the table was a plate; there were also two small

basins, and two spoons, and a broken tea-cup with a little salt in it ; and Willy and Fanny were standing by, looking wishfully at their mother. They certainly were hungry—very hungry, I have no doubt. There was also a small kettle on the fire, such a fire as it was ; and there was a rushlight on the table, which would flare and gutter down the side, for the wind came in at the cracks of the window and under the door, though there was an old curtain drawn across the room to keep off the draught as well as it could.

If you had been there, and looked round that room, you would not have seen much furniture of any sort. There were two or three chairs, a few plates on a shelf, a candlestick or two, and a flat iron, on the mantel ; and the old rickety table which had to be propped under one of its legs—the bricked floor was so uneven. That was all. There was only one other room in the cottage ; and in that was a neat bedstead, and a child's cot, with very little bed-clothes on either, and that was about all the furniture there. At one time Edward Strickland's cottage had been better furnished, no doubt ; but when a man spends a large part of his earnings on drink, the furniture of his cottage must be sold for food for his family. Ned Strickland declared that the hard times and dear bread robbed his cottage of all the comforts it had once had ; but I know better—it was Crooked Billet company, and Crooked Billet beer that did the mischief. He knew it, too, in his heart, only he would not acknowledge it.

One thing, however, must not be left out—the cottage was clean. The floor, and the walls, and the ceiling were clean, and so was Mrs. Strickland, though her clothes were old—very old, and very much patched. Willy was clean too, and so was Fanny, and so was baby-brother, who was so young that he hadn't a name yet, though they talked of calling him Thomas—Tom was a pretty name, Willy said, and so Tom it was to be. Yes, they were all

clean ; they had been washed that evening, as usual—in cold water, for their mother could not afford wood enough on the fire to heat the water in the large kettle ; but they did not mind being washed in cold water, and dried with a coarse towel, they were used to that too. And now they are ready for supper—what is it to be ?

There is a plate on the table, and in it is a bit of bread, not a big bit—perhaps such a bit as you would think might as well be given to the next beggar that comes to the door, and which the beggar would be likely enough to throw away before he had gone many steps. I have known of beggars throwing away bigger bits of bread than is on that plate.

Well, but that is all the bread there is in Mary Strickland's cottage for her own supper, and for Willy's and for Fanny's, so she must make the best of it. Stop ; no, no ; not quite all. See, she goes, that careful mother,—to the shelf, and takes down another basin. Ah ! what is that ? A few crumbs ; just a little child's handful. You would like, if you had them, to throw them out on the garden path, and see the sparrows and chaffinches, and robins, and tom-tits gather round on the boughs of the apple tree outside the window while you are watching within, and getting bolder and bolder, flutter down, one after the other, and then jerk away twittering with each a crumb between its bill, until they had all disappeared. What is Mrs. Strickland going to do with those dry crumbs ? Yes, they are very dry, some of them ; they have been saved up through the week.

How carefully she divides them into two little lots, which she puts into the two basins. Then she takes the bread—the little bit of bread,—well, perhaps it weighs a quarter of a pound, that bit of bread—which she cuts into two very equal parts, and then breaks into smaller bits—one equal part to each basin.

Why, there may be a little—a very little,—a wee dust of oatmeal in that brown jar. Mrs. Strickland

hopes there is ; and she goes to see. Yes, there is a little certainly, perhaps two teaspoonsful ; but it sticks to the sides and the bottom of the jar, so she must put a little water into the jar, and rinse it



round and round, to get out every precious speck ; and when that is done, the oatmeal water must be divided too, an equal portion to each basin. Willy looks on, and Fanny looks on very silently and gravely ; for it is a serious piece of business, this.

And now all is done except putting half a teaspoonful of salt into each of the basins, and—does it boil ? yes the water does boil at last ; the kettle has been a long time singing though, as if it meant to jeer at the fire for being so dull ; but the water boils at last. Fill up the basins then Mrs. Strickland, quick as you can, for Willy is hungry, and so is Fanny. There, it is done ; and there is their supper—something hot.

‘And what do you call it, Mrs. Strickland?’

‘Why some call it water porridge, and some call it bread sop, and some give it the name of tea-kettle broth. It does not much matter which we call it.’

Very good: but what is Mrs. Strickland going to have for supper, we should like to know, and so would Willy and Fanny.

‘You hav’n’t got none, mother;’ says Willy, with a sad contempt for grammar, which he knows nothing about, though there are some things he does know. ‘You hav’n’t got none, mother,’ he says again, and the tears stand in his eyes, and so they do in Fanny’s too.

‘I am not hungry to-night, Willy dear;’ says the mother; ‘no really, I am not; I couldn’t eat anything. You know we had some nice hot potatoes for dinner, and they take away my appetite nicely.’

So Willy and Fanny make quick work of their porridge, or whatever else they call it; only, now and then, they each of them in turn slip a spoonful into their mother’s mouth, instead of their own. She can’t help it: she must swallow it, though every spoonful seems ready to choke her. And the next spoonful that Willy and Fanny take is all the sweeter and nicer, bless their dear little hearts, they love their mother; I know they do.

It is all cleared up—every drop; and I shouldn’t wonder if Willy and Fanny could eat another basinful, if they could get it; but they are contented. As to baby-brother, he begins to cry feebly in the cradle—I forgot to say there is a cradle—and mother takes him up gently, and holding him close to her bosom, sings hushaby—

“Hush—hushaby baby, and sleep while you can,
Your sleep will be broken before you’re a man”

and baby boy takes good advice, and soon snuggles off again. Happy baby!

But Willy is not quite satisfied. He looks thoughtful. He *is* thoughtful; perhaps he is think-

ing 'how thin mother looks !' He is not quite sure that she couldn't eat something if she would try.

'Mother !'

'Yes, Willy.'

'Mother, couldn't you eat anything, now ?'

Bless the boy. Go and search all the house over, Willy, and see if there is a bit or a scrap left. Turn your mother's pocket inside out, Willy, and see if there is a half-penny in it.

But the potatoes ! Yes, Willy remembers the potatoes—a whole sackfull—two—three sacksfull, dug up in the garden last month. Where are they ? and wouldn't mother like a nice roasted potato and a little salt ? It is *so* nice, Willy thinks ; and he has tried them more than once. 'Wouldn't you now, mother ?'

Ah, Willy, Willy ! you don't know that while you were away, picking up wood, the baker came and fetched the potatoes away to-day,—all but just a few gallons which must be kept very close and snug against worse times than these—in the winter that is coming when father will be out of work, may be ; and not a crust of bread in the house. Yes, the baker had them to pay a debt for bread. He was not a hard man, that baker ; but he couldn't afford to lose his money, so it was all right that he should have money's worth instead.

'No Willy, I couldn't eat one if I was to try ever so.'

Baby boy is soundly asleep again, and put to bed in the cradle. A good thing that ; for mother has something to do besides nursing. Sit quiet, Willy and Fanny in the chimney corner. Talk if you please, but tell *whist*,—in an under-tone, softly, so as not to disturb little baby-brother.

"Hush, hushaby baby, and sleep while you can,
Your sleep will be broken before you're a man."

Half-an-hour later, and the scene was changed—not much however. The fire had a few more sticks thrown upon it to keep it from quite going out ; and

a larger piece which Willy had picked up that day—quite a prize it was, and a load for him to bring home from the park—was put on at top. But it was a green branch, and all it would do was hiss and splutter, and smoke. Perhaps it would catch fire by-and-by, ‘before father gets home, so that he may have a warm before he gets to bed.’ So it was allowed to remain, hissing and spluttering, and smoking.

Baby was still asleep ; and, by the dim uncertain light of the rush candle, Mrs. Strickland sat working with her needle, while the cold November wind whistled through the cracked windows and under the door. There was work for her to do, and not much time to do it in, for the rushlight was half burnt away, and it *would* gutter down the side. It was the only candle in the cottage, and a bit of it must be kept to light her husband with whenever he should return home. Oh, Edward Strickland ! if you had but come home straight from the pay-table, and put your week’s wages into Mary’s hand, and stayed at home to mind the children while she slipped on her bonnet and shawl to go to the village shop, your children would have had a better supper, and there would have been another candle, and the cottage would have been brighter for your presence. And if you had always done this, and avoided the Crooked Billet, and Crooked Billet company, your home would have been a happier one.

Well, there sat Mary Strickland, darning Willy’s and Fanny’s clean socks. They had had so many darns already that which was the true sock and which the darns it was next to impossible to say ; but darned they must be again, for where were the new ones to come from. Then there was Fanny’s Sunday frock, that must be darned or patched too ; and Fanny’s shoes, they must be mended somehow, or how could she go to the Sunday-school next day ? And Willy’s trousers—his only pair—they must be taken off presently, his mother said, for they must

be patched at the knee ; but that would do after he was in bed, she thought. Then there was baby-boy's frock, which was to be put on for the first time to-morrow. It was a long frock, and a pretty pink pattern it had been, but it was sadly faded, and no wonder, for it was Willy's first, when *he* was a baby, and that was then nine years ago ; after that it had been Fanny's Sunday frock, when *she* was a baby, six or seven years ago ; and after that—ah ! the poor mother's eyes were moist with tears, when she thought of whose frock that was next—it had been little Edward's ; but he didn't wear it long, and never wanted another. Dear little Edward ! the grass had been green three summers on his grave, and violets grew on it—white and purple—which Willy had planted there. Dear little Edward ! a happy spirit now in heaven. Best for him, perhaps,—oh, yes, best for him that he died. And so Mary brushed away the tear, and looked at the little pink frock to see if it wanted a string or a button. She would have liked to keep that little frock in memory of its last wearer. But she had not another, so baby-boy Tom must have it. But say, Edward Strickland, didn't you once think of little Edward, and his green grave and his happy spirit, while you were drinking at the Crooked Billet ? And didn't you know that the money you spent there that very night would have bought two new frocks for baby Tom ? And you out of work !

Your wife had more thought for you, I judge, than you had for her, through many a long day. There was your shirt, now, to be mended, and ironed for the next day. You would not have liked it if you had not had a clean shirt ; and so, see, all the little fire there was must be taken up with heating the flat iron, which your wife took down from the mantel-shelf ; and by-and-by the fire must be quite hidden from Willy and Fanny and mother, that your shirt might be well aired. You should have taken it to the Crooked Billet fire, Edward Strickland, and have

aired it there on your knees : that would have been of some little use.

They were not silent—this mother and Willy and Fanny—while this work was going on. And Fanny and Willy were not idle. Fanny could work a little at her needle, but not much, for mother had not much leisure for teaching her, and Fanny was at this time looking forward to being mother's nurse-maid. But it was Saturday night, and there was the Sunday-school to-morrow ; so Willy and Fanny stood to the table, and looked over the lessons. Easy pleasant lessons they were—just a hymn, and a few verses in the New Testament : each of them had a hymn-book and Testament of their own, and that was a good thing.

When they were quite sure that they knew their lessons, they talked, and then mother talked to them—softly it was, for fear of waking baby-boy. What did they talk about ? Was it about their father ? Well, perhaps it was, a part of the time. Was it about how he spent money as he should not spend it, and wasted time at the Crooked Billet, where he should not have wasted it ? No, no—No, no. There would have been much harm and no good in that, Mrs. Strickland knew. She would have been glad could their eyes—Willy's and Fanny's—be for ever shut against their father's faults. And though that could not be, she knew, she would not be the one to open them.

So they talked about the Sunday-school, and their teachers ; about little baby Tom, and little angel Edward ; about the garden, and the summer flowers that were gone, but would come again next year. Ah ! there were summer flowers that would never come again to *her*, the poor mother thought, and sighed as she thought it ; but she did not say so. Why should she damp their small pleasures—poor dear Willy's and Fanny's.

' You must be a man, and help me as much as you can, Willy, now little baby brother is come. These

are bad times, Willy, now bread is so dear. Why, dear, dear, when you were a little baby, Willy, a loaf only cost sixpence, and now the price is to be ten-pence they say.'

'Is that why we don't have so much to eat, mother?'

Why did not the mother answer that question at once? It was an honest one. But she did not answer it; for she knew that Crooked Billet had more to do with keeping them on short allowance, than even dear bread had; and if she could not speak the truth, she would not tell a lie. Not but that it would have been close work if not a farthing had ever gone to Crooked Billet; for wages hadn't risen in proportion with the price of bread: but so much the more reason why money shouldn't have gone for beer.

'Willy dear, look out and see if it rains now. Gently, Willy, for fear of waking baby; and don't open the door wide.'

Willy went. 'Yes, it rains, mother. Father will be wet when he comes home. wont he?'

'Yes, Willy.'

'Father doesn't come home o' nights like he used, mother. When I was a little boy, he used to ride me on his knee, and tell me pretty stories. Don't you remember, mother? Don't you, Fanny?'

Yes, poor mother remembered.

No, Fanny could not remember; it must be long ago she thought. She wished father was at home now; she would say her lesson to him: would he hear her in the morning, did mother think?

Eight o'clock, and no father:—'Come, Willy; come, Fanny, you must go to bed, it is time.'

'God bless my dear father and my dear mother, and my dear brothers, and make me a good child, for Jesus' sake;' were the last words of Fanny's prayer, learned at her mother's knee. O, Edward Strickland, you should have been there to hear it! It might have done you good—more good than anything you heard at the Crooked Billet, I think.

CHAPTER IV.

CHRISTMAS DAY—NO CHRISTMAS DINNER.

Bang—bang—bang! What a noise in Dusterly great wood! What could be the meaning of it? Up flew the pheasants from their roosting-places in the tall trees, screaming with fright and bewildered with the noise and their own sleepiness—for it was but two hours past midnight. And it was Christmas morning.

Bang, bang! went the guns again: then were shouts heard—loud angry shouts, and horrible threats, and sounds of blows—all in the middle of the wood.

Hush! there was silence for a little space. Then shouts again, and threats, but no more bangs: then a noise of running fast, and a crackling of dry wood beneath the feet of the runners. Then, by the moonlight, might have been seen men—four or five—emerging from the wood, and running as if to save their lives, across the rough stubble fields, until they were forced to stop for breath; there was no one following them. Yes, presently, another form came creeping slowly out of the shadow of the wood, and stood in the broad moonlight. It staggered like a drunken man, and fell. Then the fugitives ventured back, and, raising the fallen man, bore him away towards the gamekeeper's house in Dusterly park,—and all, for a time after that, was still and quiet.

Not for long: fresh shouts and halloos were heard in the wood; and presently, a number of men, some in smock-frocks, others in coarse fustian jackets, and all with great sticks in their hands, came out into the moonlight, and then separated, some this way and some that.

All this had been seen by Sam Giles, from one of the upper windows of the Crooked Billet, and he could understand it all. A great gathering of

poachers had been held at the Crooked Billet the evening before, and they had met to have 'a good night of it in Dusterly great wood.' But the gamekeepers had met them in the wood, that was plain, and had had a battle with the poachers. But the poachers were most numerous, and had driven the gamekeepers before them, in spite of the gamekeepers' guns: their night's work, however, was spoiled, and the poachers were now looking out for their own safety.

'And I must look out for my safety, too,' thought Sam, as he quickly withdrew from the window: 'they can't fix it on me anyhow, I think; and I'll take care that they shan't. Not one of them comes into the Crooked Billet to-night. I wonder whether there's any of 'em marked with the guns, though: but if there is, that's no business of mine.'

No doubt these were something like Sam Giles's thoughts, though he did not speak them to anybody within hearing; for, presently there was a knocking at his door.

No answer.

Another gentle knocking, and then a faint voice, and a groan, like that of a man in pain.

'Sam, Sam; Mr. Giles, Sam Giles, let me in: let me in, I say; I'm hurt.'

No answer.

'Let me in, Sam: I tell you I'm hurt—shot in the leg: let me in, do.'

No answer.

A louder knocking, and a rattling at the door. 'It's me, Sam; it's me—Ned Strickland. All the rest have gone off, and left me to shift for myself. I couldn't get out of the wood when they did. Let me in Sam, I say.'

No answer: but something very like a face peeping sly out of the window up-stairs. Was it Sam Giles's dark countenance?

'Tis a coward you are, Sam Giles, with all your cunning, to leave a poor fellow in the lurch in this

way,' said the wounded man, as he dragged himself painfully away, and then, turning round, shook his fist at the Crooked Billet.

No answer : and, in a few minutes, all was quiet again. The moon was shining brightly as ever, but not a living thing was to be seen from the Crooked Billet windows, far or near ; and not a sound was to be heard. Had a stranger passed by then, he would not have guessed how lately there had been tumult and violence and bloodshed going on in that peaceful-looking spot.

And so, Ned Strickland had turned poacher, as his father had been before him.

Yes, very soon after the dismal November night on which he had found himself out of work ; on which he had, as usual, squandered his money at the Crooked Billet, and then gone home to find a poor patient half-starved wife, uncomplaining, but sad ; no food, no firing ;—very soon after that night Edward Strickland had joined Sam Giles's band of poachers ; and others, also, had joined it, until it had become a strong party. They talked loudly—these misguided men did—about their rights and their wrongs ; but they forgot to remember that if the money they had chosen to squander at such places as the Crooked Billet had been wisely spent, or carefully laid by—distress would not have driven them to set themselves up against the law.

A poacher's home is a very sad one. I have known some, but never knew one that was not a sad one. There was Edward Strickland's, for instance, on this early Christmas morning. Let us once more look in at it.

There is the same room—the same fire-place without a fire, the same want of cheerful looking furniture, the same emptiness of cupboard. Poaching hadn't driven away poverty from that cottage,—its hard earnings hadn't done much for that cottage home.

There is some one moving about in the gloom of

that unhappy cottage. Who can it be? Not Willy nor Fanny; they were in bed hours ago, and the happy forgetfulness of daily sorrow and suffering, which comes with childhood's sleep, is over them yet. Baby-brother is asleep too. He sleeps well o' nights, Mrs. Strickland says:—a good thing that. But who is it then, moving gently and softly from bed-room to living-room, and from living-room to bed-room, like an unquiet spirit? Ah, the poor sad mother cannot rest. She has tried to go to sleep, lying down on her bed, without undressing; but she cannot rest. She knows that if—when her husband comes home at morning—he finds her weary with watching, he will scold and abuse her: but she cannot help that—she cannot sleep when he is away, doing unlawful deeds, and in danger. Oh, if he had but remembered his promise, and kept it—if he would now leave off this dreadful poaching, and stay at home o' nights, like an honest man, and seek for work—any kind of work—by day, there might still be comfort for them. If he would but keep clear of Sam Giles and the Crooked Billet, there might be hope for them. Even if they all had to go to the parish poorhouse, for want of work,—even then, there might be comfort in store for them. But this dreadful poaching! No poor Mary Strickland can't sleep for thinking of that:—she cannot lie, ten minutes together, quietly on the bed, for thinking of that:—she must get up—she must move about, though no good can come of it.

Four o'clock! Hark! what noise is that outside the cottage? Not her husband's footsteps, Mrs. Strickland thinks. A strange kind of heavy hopping step it is: and wasn't that a groan? A tap at the window next. Mary knew that signal; it was her husband's. In another moment the door was opened, and, supporting himself with a stick, Edward stumbled, or staggered into the cottage.

'A light—a light, Mary; bring a light; and some water, Mary—quick if you can,—some water to drink.'

There was a great stir that day in Dusterly. The church bells rang for morning service ; but nobody heeded them. Christmas-day as it was, the clergyman had a poor congregation that morning. There was something else to think about, and something else to do—at least there was something else to talk about—besides going to church, the Dusterly people said : and they didn't go to church.

There had been a grand battle the night of that morning in Dusterly great wood, between the game-keepers and the poachers ; and one of the game-keepers was much hurt, and all of them were driven out of the wood :—not without having their revenge though, they said ; for they knew that one of the poachers was shot ; and they knew who it was too ; and more besides that one. And the constables had been to search Sam Giles's house, and went through all the rooms in the Crooked Billet ; but there was nothing nor nobody there that they wanted. Then they went straight from there, through the village, to Ned Strickland's cottage ; and they went in there ; and presently—even while the bells were ringing for church—they came out again, carrying Edward Strickland on a mattress laid on a handbarrow, which one of them had fetched from the carpenter's, and took him away to Dusterly Hall, where the magistrates were met.

Edward's leg was bandaged up with handkerchiefs ; and to speak truly, the constables were very tender and kind to him and to his wife : but take him to the Hall they must, they said. Poor Edward looked pale and troubled ; but he did not say anything until, as they were taking him away, his wife came out of the cottage, with baby-boy in her arms, in its little faded pink frock, and Willy and Fanny came too, one on each side of her. They looked terribly scared—poor Willy and Fanny—and cried as though their hearts were bursting. Their mother looked pale, and trembled very much. She had on her bonnet and shawl :—she would go, she said, and know the worst.



And then Edward spoke kindly to her, more kindly than he had spoken for many a day, and said she could do no good ; she had better stay at home and take care of the children. And so the neighbours said ; and the carpenter promised he would come to Mrs. Strickland as soon as the examination was over, and tell her all about it. So she turned back into the cottage, and when they had kissed 'poor father's' hand—so did Willy and Fanny ; and there was great mourning in the cottage that day. And no one thought to ask, had they anything to eat ; and they hadn't anything. If they had had, I think they couldn't have eaten it.

CHAPTER V.

A NEW HOME.

ABOUT four miles from Dusterly, is the good sized town of Lorton.

It was several months after the affray in Dusterly wood, as the Dusterly people called the affray between the game-keepers and poachers, that a poor woman went to live in a small cottage just outside Lorton, which belonged to a tradesman in the town.

The poor woman was Mrs. Strickland and, with her were Willy and Fanny, and little baby Tom. She was very poor. It is hard to think how she had lived at all, since her husband had been taken away from her. But she had 'scratched along somehow,' she said :—her neighbours had been kind to her, and the parish had allowed her a small weekly sum ; the cooper in the next village had given her an old washing-tub, and she had earned a little by washing ; and Willy had gone out as 'rooker-boy' in the spring, and had earned four-pence a day at that work while he was at it.

And Ned Strickland—her husband—where was he ? Why, that battle had been a sad affair for him. There was his wounded leg, for one thing. But he hadn't been so much hurt as frightened ; and he soon got well of that. But the gamekeeper's hurt was a more serious matter, and though it could not be proved that Ned was the man who wounded him, it was proved, plainly enough, that he was one of the poachers ; so after being sent to prison, he was tried at the quarter sessions, and sentenced to be transported beyond the seas for ten years—ten long years.

His poor wife had been to see him in prison, before he was sent away,—the neighbours helping her with a little money, and taking care of the children while she was gone. Then she came home again, with a sad heart, and yet with a lightened one. She knew

the worst. Ten years ! it was a long time to look forward to—a long time to be separated from her husband ! perhaps indeed, he would never come home again. He might die, far, far from home, and wife and children. But no ; she would not think *that* ; she must hope that he would return. Then the punishment :—ten years of hardship for him to pass through. Poor Mrs. Strickland—poor wife—her heart was ready to break with sorrow when she thought of it.

But when she had got over the first rough wrestling with her grief, Mrs. Strickland felt her heart lightened. Yes, she knew the worst. Her husband would be lost to her for ten years—ten long years ; but he would come back again ;—she felt strong in that persuasion. And he would return a wiser man than he had been ; she was strong in that persuasion too. He had confessed to her, how wrong-headed and mad-hearted he had been, how he had thrown away his happiness, and how he deserved his punishment, if only for his sad neglect of her and his children. He had asked her forgiveness ; and before he had asked it, she had forgiven him—O how freely ! He had resolved to bear his punishment manfully ; and he would come back, in ten years' time, to make up by his right-doing for the wrong-doing of the past.

And so Mary went away from the gloomy prison comforted. There was hope in the future yet : and she determined, like a strong-hearted woman, to struggle on, and on, and on. Her children, and his :—for their sake and for his sakes she would work and win his way upwards. He shouldn't find, when he came back from his long banishment, that she had neglected her duties, or sunk under them. God helping her, she would be true to her husband, her children, and herself.

But what had Mrs Strickland to do with Lorton ? why did she remove from the village where she was known ? Why, she couldn't do a better thing

than go to Lorton, she thought. The tradesman of whom she hired the cottage knew her, and all about her troubles—partly through Willy, for he was Willy's teacher at the Sunday-school,—and he promised to furnish her with needle-work, sufficient to keep her and her little ones from want. He was a seller of ready-made clothes ; and in the days we are speaking of, needle-work for shops was a better paid employment than it is now.

So, Mrs. Strickland, and Willy and Fanny, and little baby-boy, went to live at Lorton.

CHAPTER VI.

WILLY.

WILLY was about ten years old when he went to live at Lorton. He was neither a big boy nor a strong boy : but it is astonishing how much even a little weakly boy can do to help a parent, if he does but try. And Willy tried. He hadn't forgot that his mother had said to him—more than once, perhaps—' You must be a man now, Willy, and help me as much as you can.' It may be that she had often said so to him ; but when she added to it, ' now that poor father is gone, and there's nobody to help us if we don't try to help ourselves'—it made a great impression on his mind. Yes—Willy tried ; and I say again, it is astonishing how much even a little boy can do if does but try.

But what could Willy do to help his mother ? Oh, there were a hundred things he could do, not one of which was a very great thing in itself ; but, put together, they made a useful boy of him. " Many a little," you know, young reader, " makes a mickle."

It was Willy who nursed little Tom, and played with him, and kept him happy, while his mother was doing her house-work and her needle-work. Fanny

took her turn too at nursing and minding baby-boy, of course ; but it was soon found that, with her mother's instructions, she could use her needle very nicely ; and as there was always plenty of work from the shop—such as shirt making, smock-frock making, waistcoat making, and other matters of the same kind—Fanny's needle-work was really quite profitable, and she hadn't so much time for nursing as she had reckoned on.

Then Willy went on errands for his mother, and did the gardening, with a little of his mother's help, and under her directions. He got up early in the morning, and chopped the wood, and laid the fire, and put on the kettle, and got the breakfast things ready, while his mother was making the beds, and putting the house tidy. He learned of her, too, how to use a smoothing iron, and after she and Fanny had sewed the seams and hemmed the hems, he could finish them off with the iron like a little tailor. I am not sure that he did not learn to work with the needle sometimes ; at least, I know that he could very neatly mend his own clothes, and darn his own stockings, when they needed. In short, I cannot tell one-tenth part of what Willy could do, and did, to save his mother's time and trouble ; and the best of it was that he did it all cheerfully and willingly and was always looking out for ways of being useful ; and had time left, after all, for play and for reading.

Willy liked reading. He still went to the Sunday-school—not the village school, however, in which he had first met with the kind teacher who was now his mother's best friend—but to one in Lorton. Occasionally he got a reward book, which he brought home, and read aloud, and then re-read to himself, again and again, till it was fairly worn out ; and sometimes Mr. Garnet gave him a little book when he went to the shop with bundles of work from his mother.

Willy also went to an evening school, where he

learnt to write and cipher. It cost four-pence a week, certainly, and this was a large sum for his mother to spare ; but she very justly and wisely thought little of this in comparison with the benefit it would be to him in his future life. And Willy got on famously : before the first winter was over, he could write a tolerably good hand, and had mastered the four great rules of arithmetic.

I don't mean, however, to represent Willy Strickland as a *perfect* little boy. Sometimes he had a will of his own, which it was difficult for his mother to manage ; and sometimes he was led into boyish mischief and forgetfulness by his playmates. But this was not often, and when he found that he had really grieved his mother, his sorrow was great.

Once Willy had a sad quarrel and fight with a boy in the street, who taunted him with being the son of a poacher who was transported. Willy wouldn't stand this, he said, and he fell furiously upon the offender, and presently walked away towards his home with black swollen eyes and a bleeding face. It happened that he had to pass by Mr. Garnet's shop, and Mr. Garnet was just then standing at the door. Very greatly surprised was the kind tradesman to see Willy in such a strange condition.

'Why, Willy, what in the world have you been about?' he asked ; 'have you been knocking your head against the church wall ?'

'He has been fighting,' another boy answered for Willy ; 'he has been fighting and has given Jem Burke such a licking.'

Mr. Garnet looked very grave. 'What was it all about?' he asked. 'Come in, Willy, and let me know what it means: I didn't think you were a little boxer ; I had a better opinion of you. Come in, I say.'

Willy obeyed ;—his little heart still swelling with the insult, and his face smarting and bones aching with the blows and cuts he had received. It was a minute or two before he could speak : at last, he

sobbed out how that Jem Burke and he were playing marbles, and he won ; and that then Jem Burke had called him a young poacher, and had jeered him because his father was transported for poaching, and was near upon being hung, for murdering a game-keeper. And he couldn't stand that, Willy said.

'Now tell me, Willy,' said Mr. Garnet, kindly, 'how it was you were at play in the street? Where had you been, or where were you going?'

Willy had been on an errand for his mother, he said, and was going home when he met with Jem Burke, who wanted him to play.

'And would your mother like to know, that when she sends you on errands, you stop to idle and play in the street? and that you keep company with a bad boy, as everybody knows Jem Burke to be,—an idle bad-principled boy, with wicked words almost always on his lips? I thought better of you than this, Willy,' continued Mr. Garnet, looking sorrowful, as indeed he felt.

Willy burst into tears, and hung down his head.

'You have committed several faults to-day, Willy,' said Mr. Garnet. 'You have abused your mother's confidence ; you have chosen an evil companion ; and you have given way to evil passions.'

'He shouldn't have run out against poor father,' said Willy, his face still flushed with anger ; 'he had no business to do that.'

'You should not have been with Jem Burke,' said Mr. Garnet, speaking mildly, 'and then he would not have had an opportunity of insulting you, and of taunting you about your father. Ah, Willy, Willy ; don't you know,' continued the kind speaker, 'that it was mixing up with bad society that ———— eh, Willy, you know what I could say, but do not wish to say so as to hurt your feelings. But you should have learnt wisdom, Willy, by what your parents have both of them suffered, and are suffering, and by what you also have suffered.'

'And Willy,' Mr. Garnet went on to say, 'don't

you remember what you have learned at the Sunday-school, about returning good for evil ; and about Jesus Christ, " who, when he was reviled, reviled not again ; when he suffered, he threatened not : " and who has left us an example that we should follow in his steps, and be like him ? Eh, Willy ?

Yes, Willy could not deny that he knew something about that ; but then it was very hard, he thought, to bear such things patiently. However, he went home, and washed his face, and cooled down his temper ; and from that time he left off playing in the streets, and quite broke off the slight acquaintance he had formed with Jem Burke,—and that was a good thing, for it was not long after that skirmish between the two boys, that Jem got into trouble and narrowly escaped being sent to prison for stealing.

Two years had now gone by since Mrs. Strickland left Dusterly. She was much better off at Lorton than she had been there. She never had, now, to go without supper herself, or to give only a scanty meal to her children. Little Tom, no longer a baby, but a chubby fellow, began to talk finely. Fanny was able to earn almost half as much as her mother, at needle-work, and Willy, a man of all work as he was, began to think it time to be earning something, too. Not that he was not always well employed at home ; but he thought that it would be doing still better for his mother, if he could find some kind of employment abroad.

Twice in the two years, Mrs. Strickland had heard from her husband. His first letter was a very desponding one. He had passed through a good deal of suffering, and was afraid that he should never see England again. But the next letter was more hopeful ; and Willy and Fanny began to talk about what they would do when he came home. They had never forgotten that terrible Christmas-day, and the last time they saw their father.

One evening, Willy Strickland burst open the door, and ran tumultuously into his mother's cottage. He was out of breath with speed and excitement.

'I am to go, mother ; Mr. Garnet says he will try me.'

'I am glad of it, Willy ; but you might have shut the door after you ; see how the candle flares. And don't make quite so much noise, Willy, if you can help it, for Fanny is putting Tom to sleep.'

Willy quietly shut the door, and came back to his mother's side.

'I wasn't afraid that you would not get the place, Willy ; were you ?'

'Yes, I was, mother ; I thought I wouldn't be big enough, and then you know ——— ; you know, mother.'

'What do I know, Willy ?'

'Why, about Jem Burke ;—that row I had with him ; you know.'

'Ah, Willy, that was wrong to be sure ; but Mr. Garnet has watched you pretty close since then, I can tell you.'

'How do you know, mother ?'

'He told me so when I went up to the shop last. But what did he say to you, Willy ?'

'He told me all I should have to do, and asked me—could I do it, did I think ?'

'And what shall you have to do, Willy ?'

'I shall have to open the shutters and sweep out the shop, to clean the knives and forks and shoes, to run on errands, to work in the garden, and—and I can't remember all besides ; but I know I can do it, mother ; and I am to have two shillings a-week, and my living besides, only I am to come home to sleep o' nights. I am so glad, mother ; only think ! two shillings a-week !'

CHAPTER VII.

PRINCIPLE IN PERIL.

I HAVE a story on my mind, which has nothing to do with Willy Strickland's history ; but as it is only a short one, I shall tell it here.

One day, a carriage stopped at the door of a shop, and a lady got out of the one and entered the other. She was a long time in the shop, and bought a large parcel of goods. When she had finished buying, the bill was made out, and the goods were packed up, and put into the carriage.

The lady took the bill and looked at it. In less time than it takes to write about it, she saw that the shopkeeper had made a great mistake in casting up the bill, a mistake of two pounds ;—the bill was two pounds *less* than it ought to have been.

Of course, then, you say or think, the lady told the tradesman of the mistake he had made, and paid him the right sum.

No, she did not. She seemed all at once to be in a great hurry, pulled out her purse, and laid down a bank note on the counter. 'Please to give me my change, as soon as you can,' she said ; 'for it is later than I thought.' The tradesman, without suspecting the blunder he had made, gave the lady her change, thanked her for her custom, and assisted her into her carriage, while she went off pleased that she was richer by two pounds, than when she entered the shop. But she took away with her a guilty conscience.

It was not long before the shopkeeper, in thinking over what he had sold, found out the mistake he had made. He hoped the lady would return, and pay him what was honestly his due ; but she did not come near his shop again ; so, one day, he called at the lady's house, to explain the mistake ; but she would not be seen, and, though the tradesman several times afterwards tried to obtain what was his right, the lady could never be prevailed upon to give up

her ill-gotten gain. The tradesman never got his two pounds. And yet the lady was rich ; she had a carriage and servants, and a fine house, and many hundred pounds a year to live upon : but part with the two pounds which she had obtained by a blunder—No, she wouldn't, and she did not. Her covetousness made her dishonest.

Now, we come back to the history of Willy Strickland.

He had been three years an errand lad at Mr. Garnet's ; and his wages had been raised from two shillings a week to three. His master liked him because he was active and steady, and industrious, and, as far as he could tell, Willy was honest also.

One day, as Willy was at work, his master came and spoke to him. 'Willy,' said he ; 'you are getting a big boy, and strong ; I think you should try to get a better situation than this. I should like very well to keep you ; but you know, a less boy could do all you have to do ; and I cannot therefore raise your wages any higher, though at other work you might earn more. Would you like to go to London, if I could get a porter's situation for you ?'

Willy said he had not thought of leaving his place, and did not wish to leave it : but if his master thought best—yes, he should like to go to London.

And there the matter rested.

A week or two afterwards, Willy went into the shop on Saturday night, after closing the shutters, and waited for his week's money. The shop had still many customers in it ; and his master was busy. But Mr Garnet did not wish to keep Willy waiting, so he put his hand hastily into his pocket, took out three shillings—as he thought—and told him he might go. So Willy put the money into his own pocket, and left the shop.

Willy did not look particularly at his money that night, except that he put two shillings into his mother's hand. This was their bargain,—that Mrs. Strickland should have two shillings out of Willy's

wages, to help pay for his board and lodging; and that the other shilling should be his own, to lay by for clothes. And Willy had a little box in which he safely locked up his money, a shilling at a time. But he did not put his shilling into the box that night: he was tired, and was soon in bed, and asleep.

Next morning, Willy found that he had suddenly become rich. In his pocket was a golden sovereign. Never had it before contained so much money. And how did it get there? It was plain enough, Mr. Garnet had made a mistake, and had given him a sovereign instead of a shilling.

Ah Willy, Willy, what makes you look so red in the face, and causes your pulse, all at once, to beat so quickly. Come tell us your thoughts.

Willy cannot do this:—he scarcely knows what they are, but he feels that there is something strange and uncomfortable in his mind. There is temptation going on. Ah Willy! your principles have never before been severely tried; they are in peril now. This is the turning point in your life, Willy, though you do not know it. This is a sore battle, Willy; worse than your battle with Jem Burke.

There stands Willy, with the sovereign in his hand; and there, unseen, but not less real for that, is Conscience struggling against Temptation.

That sovereign must go back to Mr. Garnet, says Conscience; it isn't yours, Willy Strickland.

Mr. Garnet gave it you, says Temptation, it is yours, and you have a right to keep it: keep it Willy; perhaps Mr. Garnet meant to give it you: it might not be a mistake; and if it was, it will never be found out.

Don't listen to Temptation, Willy, says Conscience: you know it was a mistake, and that you have no right to the sovereign.

You are very poor, Willy, says Temptation; look at your clothes, Willy; how old! And didn't Mr. Garnet tell you, you are worth more money than he



has given you for a long time past. Keep the sovereign, Willy ; it is yours : you have fairly earned it.

You are wrong, Willy, to listen to what Temptation is saying : listen to what the Bible says, Willy : —“resist the devil and he will flee from you,” says Conscience.

I am not a devil, says Temptation. I am common-sense and prudence. I say, Willy, you will be a blockhead if you don't keep the sovereign, and no more words about it. Look at your master, now. He is a rich man, and you are a poor boy. You will want money, badly enough, to fit you out to go to London. That sovereign will buy you a new suit of clothes when you get there ; of course you needn't buy *them* at your master's shop ———.

There, says Conscience ; doesn't that betray itself ? Why not buy the clothes at your master's shop, Willy, if there is nothing to hide ? and when

there is anything to hide, it is pretty sure to be something bad.

Pho ! pho ! says Temptation ; I tell you, Willy, that nobody will be the better for your being so scrupulous. There's your master, now : I shouldn't wonder if he had twenty sovereigns in his pocket, where he took that from. And he shouldn't have been so careless to put sovereigns and shillings all together in one pocket : it will serve him right to lose it. Keep it Willy. How silly of you to stand looking at it so ; put it in your box, and lock it up.

It will be a curse to you if you do, says Conscience, as long as you live. Ill-got gains never prosper ; if they do for a little while in this world, there is another world, Willy.

I don't know about that, says Temptation ; at any rate, there will be time enough to be sorry and repent by-and-by, if you think you have done wrong.

Take back the money, at once, says Conscience ; don't stand looking at it any longer. Run, as fast as you can, and give your master the sovereign.

This is Sunday morning, says Temptation ; and you have nothing to call you to your master's house this morning. To-morrow, will do, if you *will* take back the money ; so, put it in your box, and don't bother any more about it to-day.

"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might," says Conscience. Do it at once, and then it will be done, and you will have a quiet Sunday, Willy.

Poor Willy ; he was sadly buffeted about between Conscience and Temptation, and the piece of money seemed to stick tighter and tighter to his hand. But Conscience had one more struggle to make :—

What did the teacher at the Sunday-school talk about last Sunday ? What was the text ? What was his address about, Willy ? Think.

'Thou God seest me ! *Thou God seest me !*' exclaimed Willy, as if he was waking out of a hideous dream. 'THOU GOD SEEST ME !' he almost shouted.

In a few minutes, Willy was dressed ; and in less than a quarter of an hour, he was at Mr. Garnet's house.

Mr. Garnet was at breakfast when Willy knocked at the door.

'Eh Willy ! what is the matter ? What is it you have to say ?'

'Please sir,' Willy stammered out—'please sir take this ; you gave it me last night instead of a shilling.'

'Did I, my boy ? I did not know it : it was very careless of me ;' and Mr. Garnet looked inquiringly at Willy.

'Thank you, Willy,' he added, after a little pause : 'thank you, my boy : it was quite right to bring it back. Here is the shilling you should have had instead. Thank you, Willy.'

That was all. Willy was rather disappointed. He expected to be praised for his honesty. 'Thank you Willy,' seemed a poor acknowledgment, after the struggle he had passed through. 'Thank you Willy ;' only 'thank you Willy.'

Two or three weeks afterwards, Mr. Garnet called Willy aside.

'Willy, I have altered my mind about parting with you, if you would like to stay. You can write, I think ?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And cast up accounts ?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I should like to take you into the shop, Willy. I think you will be of use to me there. You will be able to serve customers, don't you think ?'

'Yes, sir, I should like to try.'

'Very well, then ; that's settled. Another boy is coming to take your place to-morrow. So tell your mother to come down this evening, and we'll look out some decent clothes for you to appear in. You will be of use to me in the shop, Willy, I think.'

Which was the happier, do you think ?—Willy Strickland, or the lady I told you about ?

CHAPTER VIII.

SUNSHINE.

I MUST now ask my young readers to suppose that eight years have passed away since Willy Strickland, his mother, his sister, and baby-brother Tom, first went to live at Lorton. They have had some trials to pass through in those eight years—the greatest has been the sad thoughts of ‘poor father,’ so far away, and suffering the punishment he had brought on himself by his unlawful courses. They have had cause, however, to be thankful, even on his account ; for his letters have told of his being well, and of his hopes of seeing them again at some future day. He has said in those letters, too, that if he should be spared to return home, he hopes to prove that experience has taught him wisdom. He has not complained of his punishment, which he knows he deserved, nor of ill-treatment. Indeed, he says he has been better off in that dreary banishment than many others. He has written lively descriptions of the country where he is, and the people ; and, if it were not for his wife and children at home, perhaps he would rather stay there all the rest of his life than return to England ; but, as it is, he longs to set his foot again on his native land.

Then, another great cause for thankfulness is :—How comfortable their circumstances now are ! There is Mrs. Strickland and Fanny—they have always plenty of work, for which they are paid reasonable wages. There is Willy—though I doubt whether we ought to call him Willy now, only as he has borne the name so long, we will not take the trouble of changing it—so, there is Willy, a young

man, in a good respectable situation, giving satisfaction to his employer, and earning enough to keep himself, and doing a good deal besides to make his mother's cottage-home comfortable; and there is Tom—a bigger boy than Willy was at his age, because better fed perhaps—he goes to school, and Willy pays for his schooling.

It really is a pleasant home now—that little cottage, which was so desolate and poverty-stricken when the Stricklands first entered it: and the garden is in such nice order!—that is Willy's work too. He gardens in spring and summer before the shop is opened in the morning; and on Sundays he is at home to enjoy his mother's society, and Fanny's, and Tom's.

Well; eight years have passed away. There are streaks of gray in Mrs. Strickland's dark hair, and a few lines of care and thoughtfulness about her eyes and mouth—else she does not look older—in some respects she does not look so old as she did eight years before.

Eight years! Well, it was more than eight years since they first came to live at Lorton—these Stricklands—three, or four, or five months more, for it is Christmas day.

A sad day this, in Mrs. Strickland's remembrance—how can she ever forget that terrible Christmas-day? Every Christmas-day since has been a day of weeping to her.

But this Christmas-day: it is such an one as does not happen to be, once in many years. A bright blue sky above—not a cloud to be seen. A hard frost beneath, pleasant to walk upon. Trees and hedges covered with a delicate white mantle of frozen mist, which gently dissolves in the wintry sunshine, and hangs in clear pure icicles, which glitter and sparkle like diamonds. Just such a Christmas morning there was sixteen years ago, reckoning back from 1851, and there has not been such another since, I think.

‘Mother, wouldn’t you like a nice walk this morning?’ said Willy, when he came in after breakfast. ‘It is a long time since we all had a walk together.’

A walk! oh, no: Mrs. Strickland couldn’t think of going out of doors. She would have enough to do in thinking of *that* Christmas-day, nine years ago.

‘You shouldn’t think so much—that is, you mustn’t think *too* much about it, mother,’ said Fanny. ‘Two years more, mother, and father will be home again.’

‘It is a long time to think of, even two years: somehow I feel a sinking like, when I think of it. It seems as if, perhaps, we should never see one another again, after all.’

‘O, mother, these are Christmas-day feelings. We must trust, and not be afraid. There’s joy in store for us yet, mother,’ said Willy.

‘May-be, Willy, and we are now a-much better off than we had a right to expect; but I can’t walk out with you to-day no-how. But you go, all of you—Tom and all—only mind to be back in time for dinner.’

‘I remember a Christmas-day when we hadn’t any dinner to eat,’ said Fanny.

‘And we couldn’t have eaten it if there had been one,’ said her brother: ‘but go and get ready, Fanny. I wish mother would go with us, though.’

But they were none of them to go for a walk that day, as it happened; for just as Fanny had put on her bonnet, came the postman to the door with his double knock, and a letter.

‘London! a letter from London! who can that be from? I don’t know anybody in London; it can’t be for me,’ said Mrs. Strickland.

‘It’s directed plain enough, mother,’ said Willy. ‘It’s for you, certainly: here, stop, I’ll pay the postage.’

‘’Tis nobody’s writing that I know,’ continued

Mrs. Strickland, doubtfully turning the letter over and over.'

'Better open it at once, mother, and then you'll know who 'tis from.'

I cannot go on with the story. Here is the letter.

"DEAR MARY,—Thank God I am a free man, and on English ground again. I would not write to you when the ship was in the Downs, because the time shouldn't seem long to you before you see me.

"I hope to be with you to-morrow, and spend part of Christmas-day with you, and Willy and Fanny and dear little Tom. 'Twas a Christmas-day I went away from them, a poor guilty wretch,—and 'tis a Christmas-day I should like to meet you all again ——— well, I won't say what ; but, I hope, a better father and husband, dear Mary, than I was once.

"You would like to know how it is I am come back before my time was out. 'Tis all fair and straight forward, Mary dear. A free-pardon, and liberty to come back as soon as I pleased was sent out to me from England ; I don't know why, only I am told, since I landed, that Squire Jarvis, at Dusterly Hall, got it for me. Thank him from the bottom of my heart. I'll never go poaching in his woods again, and no-where else, either in fun or in earnest,—so no more at present from

"Your loving husband,

"EDWARD STRICKLAND."

Years have passed away since that happy Christmas day, and Edward and Mary Strickland are now getting somewhat aged. They live in a little cottage near Farmer Franks, and Strickland is shepherd. He learned that trade, he says, twelve thousand miles away from home. Willy—this is the last time I shall call him Willy. Willy is a traveller for

a London wholesale house ; and he tries sometimes to persuade his father and mother to give up work altogether ; but they say 'no' to that. But every Christmas comes from London a huge hamper directed to Mr. Edward Strickland, near Seven Oaks farm, near Lorton, —shire ;' and, before it is opened, Mrs. Strickland knows who it comes from ; and as sure as it comes, so surely does she say, with tears in her eyes, but comfort in her heart,—' Ah, he doesn't mean we should go without a Christmas dinner *this* year.'

Tom — where is he ? In London. His brother has got him a situation. ' I nursed him and minded him,' says William Strickland, ' when he was ' baby-boy Tom,' and I am not going to give up minding him yet. He'll take care of himself by-and-by.'

But Fanny—Fanny: what about Fanny ? Oh, didn't I say that she is Fanny Franks now ? Mrs. Franks, I mean.



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